Remember Man Thou Art Dust: A Retrospective

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In 1984 – over 20 years ago – Debi Hacker and I (Hacker-Norton and Trinkley 1984) had the opportunity to examine a collection of late nineteenth century coffin hardware and trimmings long forgotten at the A.L. Calhoun General Store in Clio, South Carolina coupled with some early to mid-twentieth century hardware and catalogs at the Sumter Casket Company in Sumter, South Carolina. Following these discoveries, we briefly visited the National Foundation of Funeral Service in Evanston, Illinois, examining catalogs ranging in dates from 1865 through 1966. Our resulting publication was largely descriptive, although we did attempt to relate the collections to the overall economic patterns of rural South Carolina.

We noted that the Calhoun General Store collection evidenced some "stylistic lag," as we called it, containing examples of hardware that predated the store's opening in 1896 by perhaps as much as two decades. We acknowledged that it was impossible to determine if the out of style items in the general store were the result of Calhoun's idiosyncratic buying habits or if the antiquated styles were the result of the rural, impoverished nature of Marion County. We found it difficult, although we thought not impossible, to quantify the prevailing cultural and economic biases.

We suggested that there was a shift from the swing bail to the two lug short bar handles around 1880, and that by 1912 the extension handles were gaining popularity. We offered similar temporal suggestions for studs, escutcheons, thumbscrews, caplifters, hinges, and related items. We also, somewhat naively, attempted to document costs and relate those costs to social status, noting that coffin hardware might reflect either "real" or "apparent" status. Distinguishing between the two might prove difficult.

Finally, remembering that our study was prepared over 20 years ago, we were also able to identify artifacts that colleagues of that time were listing as unknown, such

as caplifters. And we were able to explain the "plaques" found in the thoracic region of burial. We also suggested that a more thorough knowledge of coffin hardware might help archaeologists charged with burial removals.

In spite of my rosy recitation of our study, I must note that we were criticized – justifiably so – for over reaching, for attempting to do too much with too little. For example, Edward Bell (1987:16; 1990:55) discounts efforts to derive economic data from coffin hardware, suggesting that the "complexity of behaviors, beliefs, and material culture" are too great. Even Bell, however, comments that his Uxbridge almshouse coffin hardware was "unremarkable" and that the "minimal nature of the burials is a clear testimony of the status accorded the poor" (Bell 1987:151) – indicating some socio-economic observations based on hardware may be possible.

There are a number of researchers who have expanded on, refined, and vastly improved our original research. Mentioning just a very few – and intending no slight to those not included – Pat Garrow used his research at the Nancy Creek Primitive Baptist Church in Georgia to assign broad dates: swing bails were used from the 1870s to shortly after 1900; short bar handles begin replacing swing bails about 1900; and extended bar handles were noted to be a late addition (Garrow 1987:16-17). Barbara Little and her colleagues suggested that mortuary display might be used to support a desired status, especially in the postbellum when the South's social structure was destabilized (Little et al. 1992:418-419). But perhaps most interesting is the exceptional work conducted by James Davidson (1999) at the Freedman's Cemetery in Dallas, Texas. Davidson went beyond simple handle styles to examine the specific embossed design motifs in order to provide very specific dating of over 1,000 burials. Using hardware catalogs and patent information he was able to match perhaps75% of the recovered hardware to a specific manufacturer – an incredible feat. This work was expanded and refined by Davidson (2004) in his dissertation. He also calculates wholesale costs of the hardware and coffin, using the data to document "wealth expended on a mortuary display within the Beautification of Death movement." While a laborious process, he demonstrates that hardware can be used successfully to document change over time and offer insights on the display of wealth.

Our own research has gone down very similar paths, with very similar results. We have not focused on design motifs – a process that however successful is unlikely to be widely duplicated simply because of the extraordinary labor involved. We believe that the simple form of the hardware – harkening back to our original study and Pat Garrow's projections – can be used to provide a broad temporal framework. Although offering far less precision than design motifs, it can still help to broadly date collections

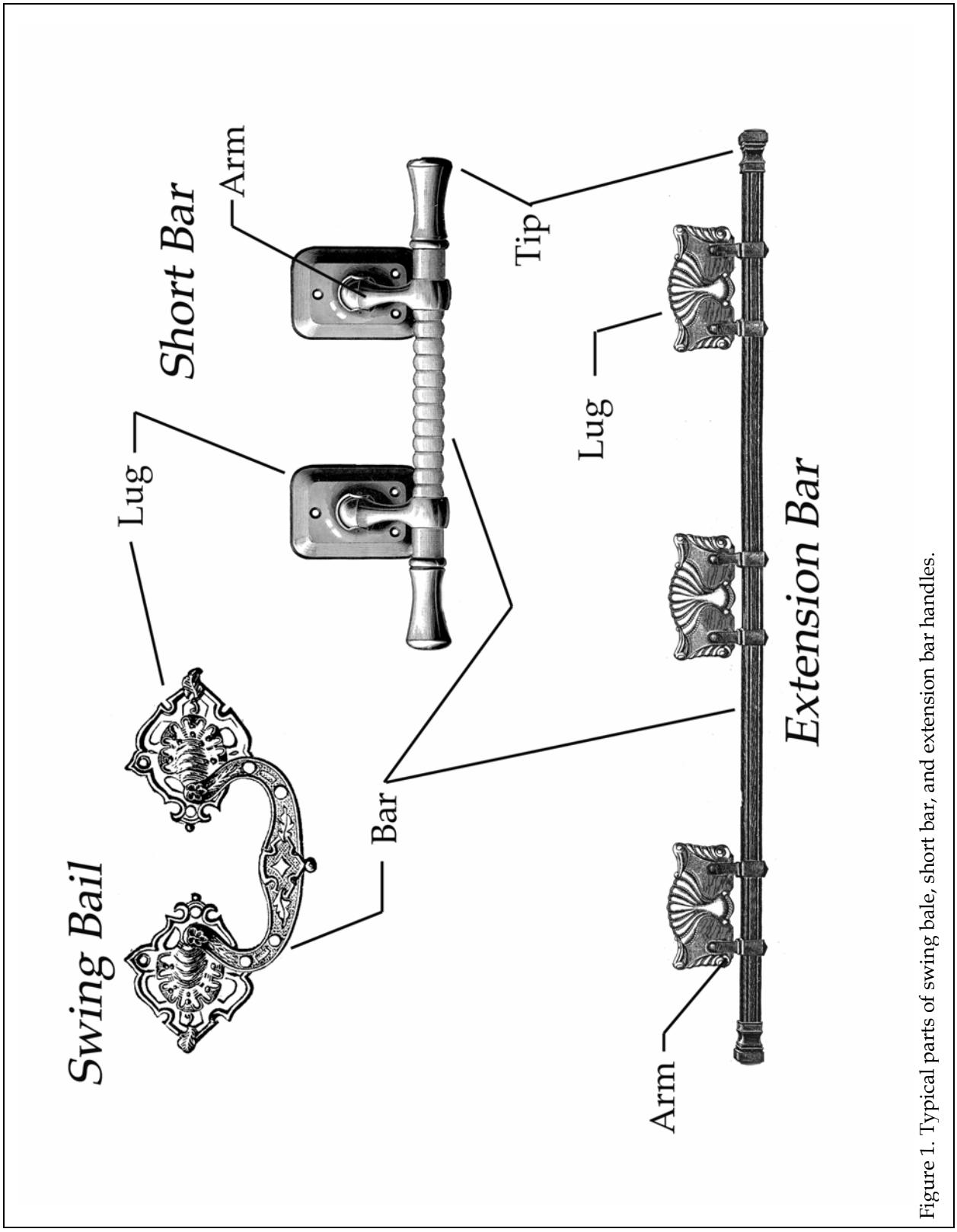

Figure 1. Typical parts of swing bale, short bar, and extension bar handles.

and burials – providing immediate assistance to coroners, medical examiners, and archaeologists faced with small collections and limited budgets.

When a series of 37 coffin hardware catalogs, dating from 1865 to 1962, are examined and the handles are classified as ring bail/other (i.e., stationary), swing bail, short bar, or extension bar (Figure 1), we can see that there are relatively well defined periods of commercial availability (Figure 2). Ring bails likely predate the mid-

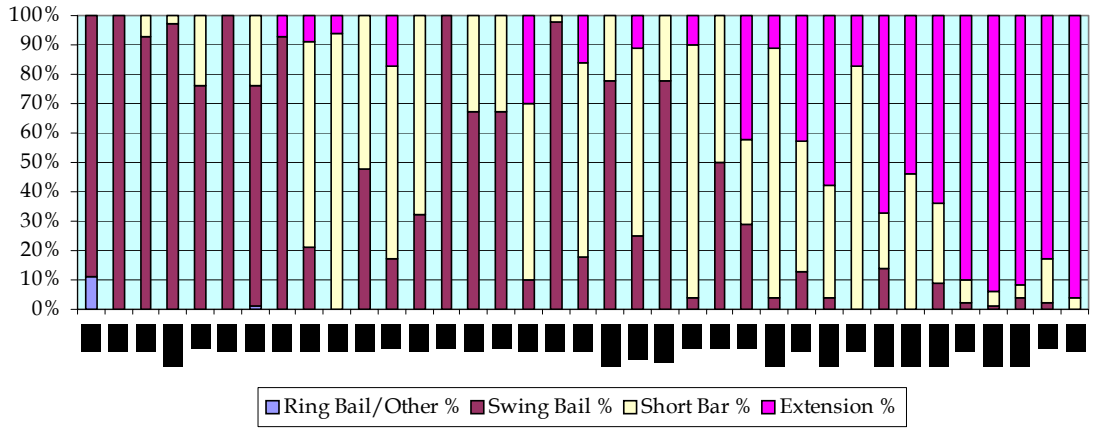

Figure 2. Temporal changes in coffin handle styles illustrated in hardware catalogs.

nineteenth century and may reflect a late eighteenth and early nineteenth style from England. Swing bails, however, are a dominant style to about 1880, although clearly there were companies that continued to offer – even rely – on the public's acceptance of this style into the early twentieth century (confusing this, however, is the late use of this style on infant coffins). While short bar handles were offered by at least 1869, they really don't appear to have made much of an impression on wholesalers until about 1880 (replacing swing bails).

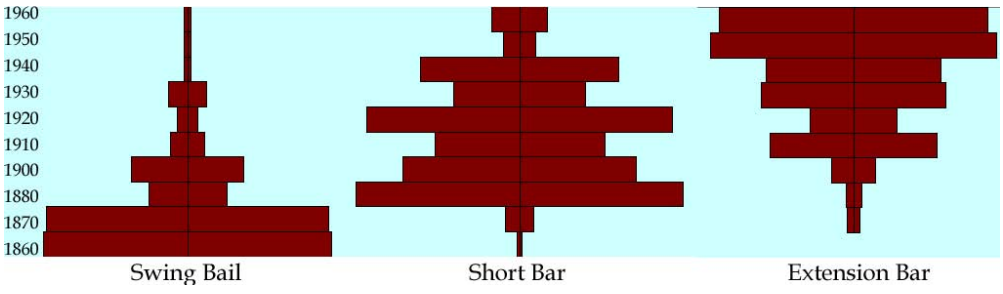

Figure 3. Availability of coffin handles styles

Extension handles were offered by a few companies as early as 1877-1880, but do not appear to have made much of an impact and disappeared from catalogs for about 20 years until re-introduced in the first decade of the twentieth century. Even then,

however, they don't appear to have been particularly popular until about 1920. These results are shown graphically as a more conventional seriation in Figure 3.

While these data can certainly be refined, we believe that they offer important general information to a broad range of researchers who simply don't have the collections or time to conduct more exhaustive research.

Of course, wholesale availability doesn't necessarily translate into popular acceptance, especially in areas where there may be considerable conservativism. This may be illustrated by the three McClung samples from 1891, c. 1905, and c. 1912. In each case the catalog illustrates styles that, based on other catalogs, have already waned in popularity. What is not clear, of course, is why these were being offered by McClung and whether they were actually being purchased and used by the public.

Another way of examining the data is to also look at widely available coffin catalogues to determine the hardware styles used by the manufacturers. Of course, it is important to realize that many coffins were being offered to undertakers without any trimmings – allowing the shell to be purchased separately – and these are frequently illustrated in the catalogs. Moreover, while it seems reasonable that manufacturers would illustrate their wares with the most modern trimmings, this was perhaps tempered by their equal desire to provide the public with what was popular, regardless of how recently introduced the item might be.

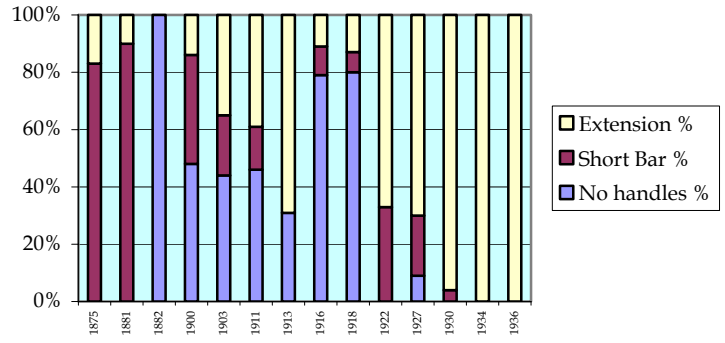

Figure 4. Coffin handle styles illustrated in coffin catalogs.

In spite of a substantial collection of coffin catalogs many could not be used since they lacked reliable dating (being identified only as a number or letter), leaving a very small sample of only 14 that we could incorporate in this study. These suggest that during the nineteenth century coffin manufacturers tended to offer their wares without hardware, allowing the local undertaker or furniture dealer to trim the coffin directly. With just a couple of anomalies by the twentieth century coffin manufacturers began to at least illustrate their wares with "tasteful" trimmings (some casket manufacturers even began producing their own hardware). And again, excepting two catalogs, the prevalence of extension

bar handles rises dramatically; by the 1930s they are almost the only style being illustrated.

Thus, while the hardware catalogs continued to offer short bar (and even swing bails) into the last half of the twentieth century, the coffin manufacturers themselves were rapidly focusing on the new and improved hardware to sell their products.

Another source of data is funeral home records. Davidson was very fortunate to have a variety of detailed records at his disposal in Dallas. Most of us are not so fortunate and these records are incredibly scarce. For South Carolina we have been able to identify only three sets – those of the J.M. Connelley Funeral Home in Charleston, South Carolina spanning 1889-1897, those of the McDougald Funeral Home in Anderson, South Carolina spanning 1934-1952, and those of the J.W. McCormick Funeral Home in Columbia, South Carolina spanning 1906-1915 (Trinkley and Hacker 2004). Unfortunately, the Connelley and McDougald records were transcribed only for their genealogical information and contain no data on burial costs or items purchased. The McCormick records are more fully transcribed and the 10 year period includes 2,101 individuals once those from the S.C. Penitentiary and State Hospital for the Insane are removed. Only 44 (just over 2%) of these are identified as African Americans, so we will discount these as well. This leaves 1,829 burials with costs. Of these only seven have any details concerning handle hardware and these are entirely descriptive. None provide style numbers and only two provide pricing. The only other hardware mentioned is a single plate, with engraving priced at $1.00.

Thus, the South Carolina data do not offer nearly the precision that Davidson had at the Freedman's Cemetery in Dallas. Nevertheless, we can gain some insights. For example, the average coffin cost was $64.23 ($1,259 in 2005$) and the mode was $70.00 ($1,372 in 2005$), with a range from $4.00 to $600.00 ($78 to $11,764 in 2005$). These take on greater meaning when we realize that the average family income

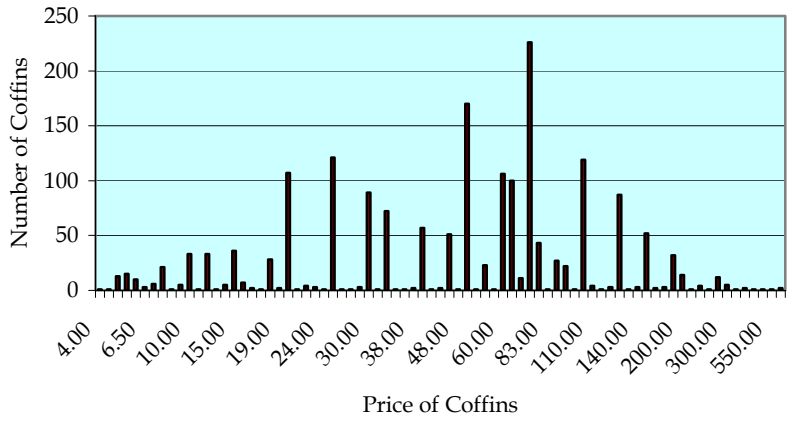

Figure 5. Coffins purchased at various prices.

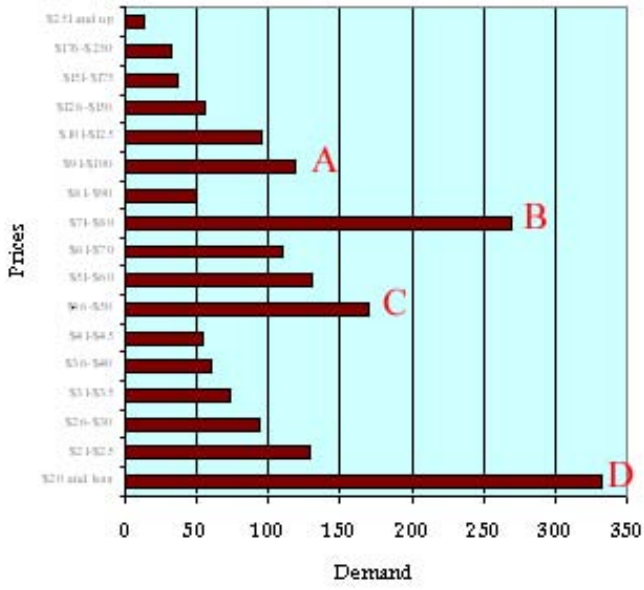

Figure 6. Price points (at A, B, C, and D) along the demand curve.

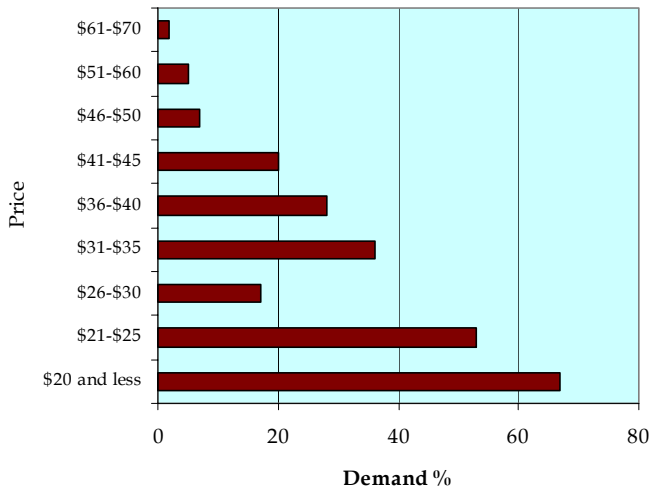

Figure 7. Proportion of children's coffins by price ranges showing two price point ranges (at $31-$35 and $20 and under.

in 1914 was only about $627 ($12,294 in 2005$).

Figure 5 illustrates the results, providing a vague bell curve with many intervening prices that don't cleanly fit. Figure 6 may be a bit more revealing, helping to identify McCormick's four seeming well defined price points, each corresponding to relatively high demand. Figure 6 suggests a demand curve in simple microeconomics.

As we examine the coffins priced at $20 or under (332 in all), 29 were stillborns with coffins ranging from $5.00 to $15.00 (average was $8.29 and the modal price was $8.00). An additional 94 were for children (based on sizes under 5/0 and/or other features). Thus, of the 332 coffins in the least expensive range, 221 (67%) were for infants and children – accounting for the inexpensive price points. Only 50 (15%) can definitively be considered adult (based on size).

Figure 7 illustrates the proportion of children's coffins by price ranges, revealing that rarely was more than $45 spent on a child's coffin and that there are two clearly defined price point ranges -- $20 or less and $31-$35. Mortality rates for South Carolina children during this time period are difficult to find, but we do know that 37% of the deaths in Charleston (the only

reporting city in South Carolina) were of children under the age of 15. The high child mortality rate (estimated at a rate of about 110 [Haines 1998]) may have been reason enough to limit the cost of children's coffins. The costs were also limited by size, construction, and materials used.

Although the McCormick data allow us to only sample socio-economic issues among whites, we note that the average cost of coffins for males (using a random sample of 50) is $88, compared to $70 for females. This is not a dramatic difference; moreover, the standard deviation for the coffin prices for males is $73, while for females it is only $44, perhaps suggestive of much greater status variation among Columbia area males than females. Differences in coffin styles are far less noticeable. Black coffins were used only for men, and white coffins were not quite twice as common among females. Silver or silver-gray coffins were used nearly equally for both males and females. And while pink was used only for females, plushette was found only being used for males.

The McCormick records provide a few other details. For example, of the 1829 itemized coffins, 1520 (83%) included boxes – suggesting that at least in this market archaeologists can expect to find evidence of boxes in the burials. In contrast, only 158 (3%) were sold with vaults. Of those sold with vaults only nine (6%) were also sold with a box. This seems to suggest that boxes were seen as a substitute, albeit a poor one, for a vault. This is borne out by coffin costs. The average cost with vaults was $138.28, compared to an average cost of only $57.27 without a vault.

Where the vault material was identified, they were consistently slate, ranging in price from $30 to $50 (although $50 was the norm). Where the material was not identified costs ranged from $5 to $50. Those in the $30 to $50 may also have been slate and, if so, only two (costing $5 and $10) are left. These prices are so low that they may refer only to "lined graves" – graves that had boards placed in them to hold back the soil and create a temporary vault. There are several brick vaults mentioned, but never with a burial where the coffin cost was identified. Where they occur costs range from $25 to $40 and likely represent laid brick linings. These prices seem to be generally in keeping with the few cemetery publications where such work is listed.

Although not directly on-topic, we'll make one last observation before leaving the McCormick data. During this period only 729 of the bodies with identified coffin prices were "preserved" or embalmed (about 40%). The conventional wisdom (see, for example, Laderman 2003:6) is that acceptance of embalming spread rapidly – a view that is certainly not supported by the McCormick data. Although dating at least to the Civil War, five decades later just two-fifths of McCormick's clientele were selecting this

service. It may be that some of this resistance (if there was resistance, as opposed to simple poverty that precluded wide-spread acceptance) was founded on the Protestant belief that embalming mutilated the body and rendered it adulterated, potentially affecting its ultimate resurrection (Habenstein and Lamers 1955:336; Laderman 1996:53-54).

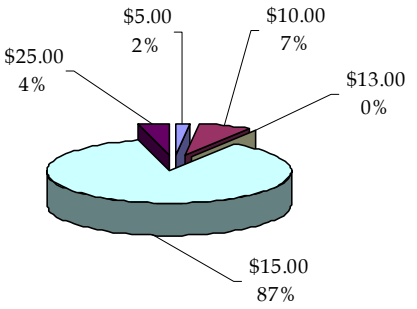

Figure 8. Embalming costs identified in the McCormick records associated with identified coffin prices.

Regardless, the highest embalming cost was $25, paid by 30 individuals (five of whom were being shipped). With an average cost of $14.87, the vast majority of the 729 bodies received "preparation" costing only $15 (Figure 8).

Where embalming was paid for, the average coffin cost was $91.03, nearly 1.5 times the overall average coffin cost. Moreover, 102 of the 158 (64%) vaults are found with embalmed remains, suggesting a strong correlation.

These data may be compared to very similar records we have identified from Pennsylvania, dating between 1910 and 1918. Although the sample consists of only 81 burials with priced coffins, the average coffin price was $59.92, a modal value of $65, and a range from $5 to $165. These figures are very similar to McCormick's data, although we don't have the high end coffins. Twenty-four of the 81 coffins were also sold with boxes (30%), far less than for McCormick.

Nineteen of the coffins were sold with vaults. Seven (37%) were clearly identified as planks or lining, with costs of $1 to $10. Eight were slate, ranging in price from $26 to $36. One, for only $40, was steel. One was brick ($3.75) and one was stone. As with McCormick, the vaults are found with more expensive coffins (the average coffin price with a vault was $81.53, without was $53.75).

Embalming was performed on 57 of the bodies (70% of the total) – presenting starkly different data than Columbia. In addition, the cost varied from $2 to $10, with a mean of $5.64, reflecting only a third the cost of McCormick. Embalming, however, was still associated with higher prices paid for coffins (average of $70.97 with embalming, but only $37.81 without).

These differences suggest that we may see significant regional variation. Of course, this was observed by Quincy Dowd in his 1921 examination of the funeral industry. Speaking of arterial injection, he noted, "in the South it is little practiced as yet, not at all with colored people" (Dowd 1921:52).

We'd like to briefly turn to the issue of hardware costs. While Davidson has been able, with enough catalogs and adequate time, to identify specific hardware and assign specific wholesale costs, allowing very accurate costs to be determined for individual burials, it seems regrettably unlikely that this approach will be widely adapted, especially for small, marginally funded projects. But is there an alternative? We have examined hardware costs for swing bail, short bar, and extension handles, using both period costs and costs standardized to 2005 dollars.

The period costs for swing bail and short bar handles increase only modestly over the nearly 100 year period. When the period costs are converted to 2005 dollars the trend is almost stagnant. Of course there are differences between manufacturers and wholesalers. For example, for whatever reason the 1918 prices by Simmons appear significantly out of line, although we have no close comparisons and this may reflect the 18% inflation rate caused by the First World War. If the catalog was issued late in the year (post-September, perhaps), then the death rate from the influenza pandemic may also have played a role. In addition, many of the distributors offered a wide range in styles and finishes, resulting in the ability to distinguish individual coffins through the use of more expensive hardware, significantly above the overall cost average. This opportunity to elaborate, at least for swing bales, appears to decline into the twentieth century.

Extension bar costs suggest a very different pricing mechanism. Using period costs the trend prices appear clearly stagnant, while the 2005 prices reveal that the costs actually declined as the new style became more firmly entrenched. There remained throughout, however, considerable price variation that allowed families to upgrade the hardware.

Curiously, coffin plates exhibit the most noticeable increase in price, whether period or standardized 2005 prices are examined. In addition, plates offered the greatest opportunity for either savings or display by families.

We believe these data, while preliminary and clearly needing larger samples, suggest several conclusions. First, they support the observations of Bryan's 1917 handbook for funeral directors in which he outlines how to match the value of hardware to that of the casket. Arguing that the funeral director is "justly entitled to

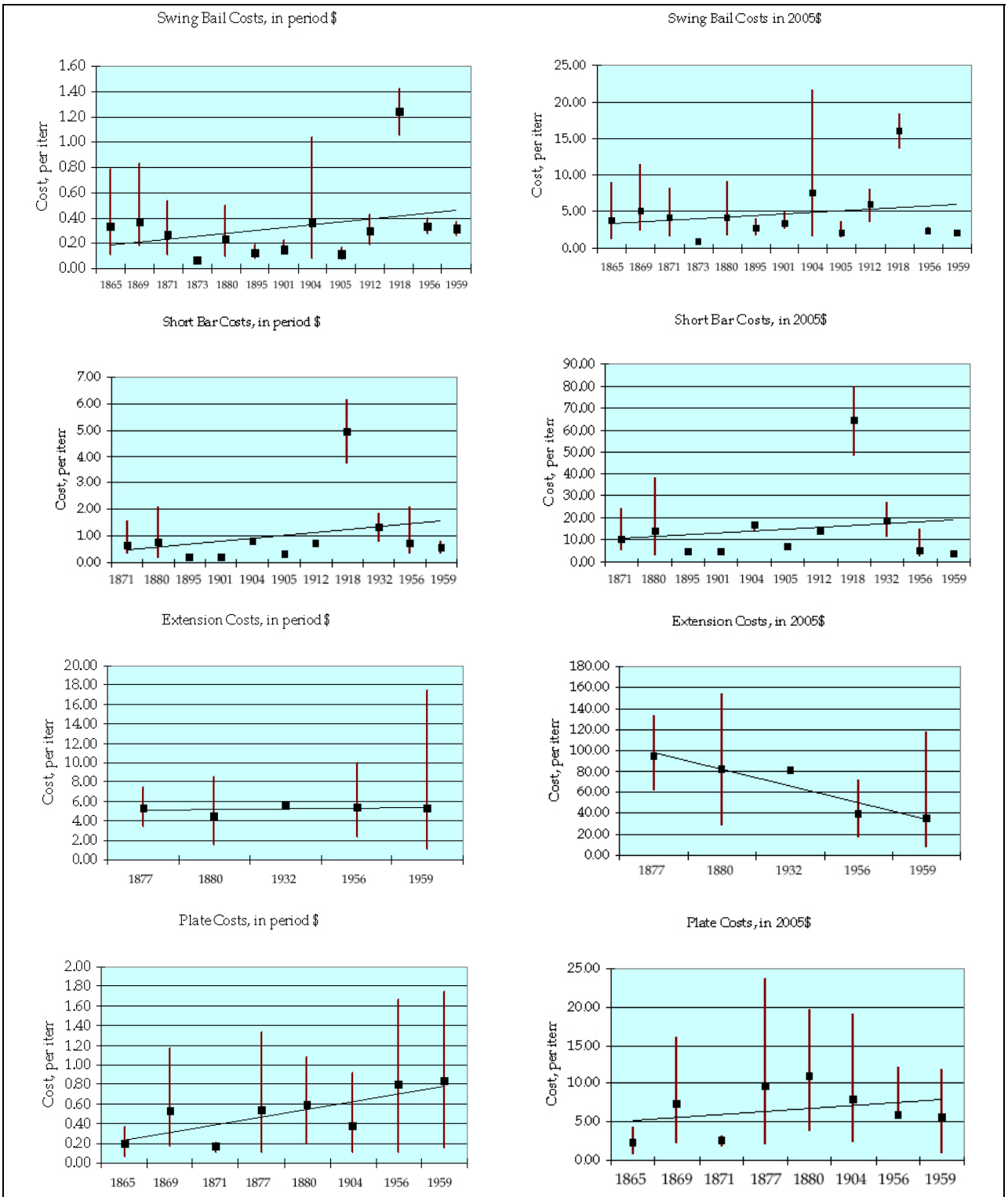

Figure 9. Hardware costs comparing period and 2005 costs, each showing a linear trend line.

liberal compensation" and a "legitimate profit" he provided a series of tables that sought to outline the appropriate value of hardware associated with each coffin. He also offered a series of pithy adages, such as, "cheap handles to carry a heavy body is poor economy," "Your customer will be better pleased to have paid more and had the casket well-trimmed," "Proper trimming is more essential for appropriateness than the casket," and "Many of the wealthiest class want the least pretentious yet want the Best." Clearly the hardware manufacturers were heeding this advice and providing undertakers with a wide variety and cost. This suggests, at least to us, that the level of detail in analysis espoused by Davidson is virtually essential. Very simple analyses will offer only the most basic information.

For example, swing bails are typically less costly than short bars, and they in turn are less costly than extension handles. And a casket with four handles will likely have less hardware costs than a casket with six similar handles. Thus, very simple economic observations may be possible, but these may offer relatively little assistance.

Of course, even Davidson's careful attention to design motifs may not provide assistance to determine if the handle tips were silver chased or gold tipped, if bars were crystallized or oxidized, or if they were non-tarnish copper-brass or had a top plated finish – all of which could result in a substantial difference in wholesale cost.

These data suggest that coffin plates may be among the most cost sensitive items, although again there is considerable variation and analysis must go beyond simple pattern identification. What is interesting to us is how – or perhaps why – these plates not only lasted so long, but also had such variability. Even Bryan observed that, "to inform your patrons that the price (on a high-grade casket) includes a solid silver plate stamps value on the entire outfit." Perhaps we are seeing the height of luxury?

Throughout all of these discussions it is important to remember that we – like Davidson – are using wholesale costs. These may have little resemblance to the price actually paid by the consumer. Dowd notes that retail prices on caskets could be five to ten times the wholesale cost (Dowd 1921:15). In addition, he observes that a large proportion of the undertakers carried little or no stock, virtually eliminating their overhead costs. Certainly both coffin and hardware wholesalers promoted this approach through liberal terms and quick shipments. Our own examination of the McCormick records reveals markups beginning at 150% on the wholesale cost. Still born coffins that manufacturers sold for .75¢ to .90¢, McCormick was selling for $7 to $10. Coffins being sold for $3.75 to $5.25, McCormick was retailing for $20 to $25. Even considering freight, these represent a very hefty profit margin on death.

Thus, when we examine coffin hardware from a burial, wholesale costs may provide a standardized approach, but they fail to truly represent the cost to the consumer or the family's public display to the community.

Our retrospective, we hope, reveals the value and potential of the research. We are not prepared to dismiss the potential for this research to provide significant insight into status and economic display, but we are also more cautious in the mechanics and approach. Whether in agreement or not, we hope that there will be a renewed interest in – at the very least – more carefully documenting the coffins and hardware resulting from relocation projects.

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Coffin Hardware Catalogs Used in This Study

Date	Company	Location
1865	Russell & Erwin	New Britain, CT
1865	Markham & Strong	E. Hampton, CT
1869	Meriden Britannia Co.	New York, NY
c. 1870	Miller Brother's & Co.	Boston, MA
1871	Sargent & Co.	New Haven, CT
1873	James L. Haven & Co.	Cincinnati, OH
1877	Paxson, Comfort & Co.	Philadelphia, PA
1880	Meriden Britannia Co.	W. Meriden, CT
1880	Crane, Breed & Co.	Cincinnati, OH
1880	Cincinnati Coffin Co.	Cincinnati, OH
1881	Cincinnati Coffin Co.	Cincinnati, OH
1882	Columbus Coffin Co.	Columbus, OH
1891	C.M. McClung & Co.	Knoxville, TN
1895	W.B. Belknap & Co.	Louisville, KY
1901	W.B. Belknap & Co.	Louisville, KY
1903	National Casket Co.	Albany, NY
1904	Sargent & Co.	New Haven, CT
1905	Chattanooga Coffin & Casket Co.	Chattanooga, TN
c. 1905	C.M. McClung & Co.	Knoxville, TN
c. 1911	Hearne Bros. & Co.	Whiteakers, NC
c. 1912	C.M. McClung & Co.	Knoxville, TN
1912	Embalming Burial Case Co.	Burlington, IO
1918	Simmons	Philadelphia, PA
1919	Atlantic Coffin & Casket Co.	Rose Hill, NC
c. 1920	Cleveland Burial Case Co.	Cleveland, OH
1920	Sargent & Co.	New Haven, CT
c. 1925	F.H. Hill	Chicago, IL
1932	Belknap	Louisville, KY
c. 1934	Electrolier Manufacturing Co.	Montreal, Canada
c. 1940	McClelland Casket Hardware Co.	Richmond, IN
c. 1945	Dickey-Grabler Co.	Cleveland, OH
1956	Victor Casket Hardware Co.	Galesburg, IL
c. 1959	National Metal Products Co.	Connersville, IN
c. 1960	McClelland Casket Hardware Co.	Richmond, IN
1961	Sterling Casket Hardware Co.	Maspeth, NY
1962	Koppen Kasket Hardware Co.	Belvidere, IL

Coffin Catalogs Used in This Study

Date	Company	Location
1875	Cincinnati Coffin Co.	Cincinnati, OH
1881	Cincinnati Coffin Co.	Cincinnati, OH
1882	Cleveland Burial Case Co.	Cleveland, OH
1900	Peerman Burial Co.	Richmond, VA
1903	National Casket Co.	Albany, NY
1911	Milwaukee Casket Co.	Milwaukee, WI
1913	National Casket Co.	Albany, NY
1916	United States Casket Co.	Scottsdale, PA
1918	Atlantic Coffin & Casket Co.	Rose Hill, NC
1922	Des Moines Casket Co.	Des Moines, IO
1927	Bristol Manufacturing Co.	Bristol, VT
1930	National Casket Co.	Albany, NY
1934	John Marsellus Casket Co.	Syracuse, NY
1936	Boyertown Burial Casket Co.	Boyertown, PA
1952	Boyertown Burial Casket Co.	Boyertown, PA